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ABSTRACT

Turiel (1978, 1979) has proposed that children have distinct concepts of moral and social rules and can distinguish between them at a very early age. Assuming this perspective, a study was conducted to examine how adolescents who exhibit antisocial behaviors understand and interpret school rules with moral and social-conventional underlying themes. Subjects were 20 students attending a high school for students with serious behavior problems. Scores on the Behavior Problem Checklist classified subjects as high aggression (HA) or low aggression (LA). Subjects read and answered questions about four stories of an adolescent breaking a school rule. Two of the stories had moral themes and two had social-conventional themes. Given the existence of a school rule, subjects evaluated the transgression negatively in all four stories with the exception of the story portraying a fight between two students. In this story, subjects in the HA group reported that the act was acceptable despite the rule. In the absence of a rule prohibiting the acts, all subjects positively evaluated the social-conventional acts, and negatively evaluated the act of destroying school property. In the absence of a rule, LA subjects negatively evaluated the act of two students fighting while HA subjects positively evaluated fighting. These findings suggest that children do not have a unitary system of rules; they make conceptual discriminations between rules by reasoning on the basis of moral or conventional criteria. (NB)

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REASONING ABOUT SCHOOL RULES: A STUDY OF ADOLESCENTS WITH ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIORS

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REASONING ABOUT SCHOOL RULES:
A STUDY OF ADOLESCENTS WITH ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIORS

Introduction

Antisocial adolescents exhibit behaviors which are in conflict with the values of the larger society. More often than not they are in trouble in the school setting, as they seem to lack internal controls and to act impulsively, without consideration for the consequences of their actions. While research has yielded important information about some of the factors involved in antisocial behavior (Glueck & Glueck, 1962), an important step toward enhancing our understanding of juvenile delinquency lies in the study of cognitive aspects involved in the syndrome. Assuming a cognitive developmental perspective, the present study focuses on moral reasoning, examining how antisocial adolescents conceptualize school rules.

Thus far research on moral development has largely adopted Kohlberg's (1964) model which has been derived from Piaget's (1965) theory. Central to Kohlberg's perspective is the notion that moral knowledge is constructed and elaborated by the individual through his interactions with the environment during the course of development. Moral knowledge follows a fixed sequence of stages each of which is a structural whole representing a more complex mode of moral reasoning than the

previous one.

In his early research Kohlberg (Blasi, 1980) argued that there is a connection between moral reasoning and behavior and went on to demonstrate that a relationship exists between sociopathic behavior and preconventional reasoning. However studies following Kohlberg's approach have failed to substantiate his claims and have yielded mixed findings (Campagna & Harter, 1975; Fodor, 1972, Haviland, 1977).

Two reasons may account for these inconsistencies: (a) research has treated antisocial adolescents as a homogeneous population ignoring the fact that delinquency is a complex phenomenon including various personality and behavioral dimensions; (b) guided by Kohlberg's model studies are based on the assumption that children have a single, unitary concept of rules which becomes gradually differentiated with development.

Another way of conceptualizing moral development which has received a great deal of support from recent studies (Davidson, Turiel & Black, 1983; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Weston & Turiel, 1980) has been proposed by Turiel (1978, 1979) who has argued that children have distinct concepts of moral and social rules and can from very early in their lives distinguish between them. In Turiel's (1978) scheme, social rules, or social conventions are behavioral uniformities which coordinate the interactions of individuals in social systems. They refer to shared knowledge

and standards about behavior and originate in the social system of a given society. Examples of social conventions thus include, mode of greeting, ways of eating, dress code, etc.

In contrast to social conventions, concepts of morality are independent of the social structure and do not involve coordination of actions. This is because they are structured on the individual's underlying concepts of justice (Piaget, 1965; Turiel, 1978). The perception of an act as moral then, depends on factors that are intrinsic to the act itself. For example, stealing property is regarded as a moral transgression because of the perception of harm to the owner that results form the act.

Controlling for the fact that juvenile delinquency is not a unidimentional phenomenon and assuming Turiel's perspective, the present study is directed toward examining how adolescents with antisocial behaviors understand and interpret school rules with moral and social-conventional underlying themes.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 20 adolescents (10 males and 10 females) who attended a high school for children with serious behavior problems. Fourteen of the Ss lived with their families whereas six were residents of a treatment program for maladjusted

adolescents in Northern California. Ss ranged in age from 16 to 17. At the time of the interview 11 Ss were on probation, whereas 9 attended the school because they exhibited conduct problems. The racial composition of the Ss was mixed, 11 being caucasian, 7 black and 2 hispanic.

Classification of Ss: In order to provide information about the personality differences among Ss, two counselors evaluated each S using the Revised form of the Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1983). On the basis of their profiles on the RBPC, Ss were classified into two groups: the high aggression (HA) and the low aggression (LA) group. Eleven Ss comprised the HA group. Their means on the socialized aggression (SA) and conduct disorder (CD) categories of the RBPC were 21.73 and 28.46 respectively. The remaining Ss were characterized by less aggressive behaviors and comprised the LA group. Their means on the SA and CD subscales were 11.56 and 14.44 respectively.

Materials

The materials for this study consisted of four stories, two describing events in the moral domain and two portraying social-conventional actions. Each story was about an adolescent breaking a school rule. Stories were classified as belonging to the moral or conventional domains on the basis of Turiel's (1978) criteria. Stories with themes that centered around the welfare

of others or protection of rights and the deprivation of something to which the person is entitled, were classified as belonging to the moral domain. Stories with themes around rules that regulate social interactions were classified as belonging to the social-conventional domain. The themes and content of the four stories are presented in Appendix 1.

Procedure

Each S was given instructions orienting him to the task. Then the presentation of the stories followed. The order of presentation of the stories was counterbalanced by alternating the stories with moral and conventional themes for all Ss. Thus half the Ss were read a moral theme as the first and third story, and a social-conventional theme as the second and fourth story. For the other half of the Ss this order was reversed.

Following the presentation of a story, each S was asked a standard set of questions presented in Appendix 2. The questions were designed to elicit the S's reasoning about moral and social rules, and were based on an interview developed by Turiel (1978). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Recordings were erased at the end of the study to ensure anonymity.

Results

All analyses comparing the responses of Ss on each question were based on Fisher's exact test. Since no differences were found between male and female Ss their responses were combined. All comparisons within each domain were between Ss in the HA and LA groups.

Group differences on the stories with social-conventional themes

The negative and positive responses of the HA and LA groups were compared on each question, for each story. The affirmative responses of the two groups to the two social-conventional stories are presented on Table 1. It can be concluded that the

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Insert Table 1 about here

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majority of subjects in both groups negatively evaluated the acts (undressing in class, disobedience to the teacher), in the presence of a school rule (Question 1). At the same time the majority of subjects positively evaluated the acts in the absence of the rule (Questions 3, 6, 7), and stated that teachers as well as individuals in other societies can decide to change such rules.

Significant differences were found between the HA and LA groups for Question 4 in both stories and for Question 2 on the

story which involved a student undressing in class. The proportions presented on Table 1 show that a significantly ($p < .05$) higher proportion of subjects in the HA group felt that both acts would be all right if the actor was not apprehended by the school authorities. With respect to Question 2, a much higher proportion of subjects in the LA group positively evaluated the presence of the school rule as compared to a lower proportion of Ss in the HA group ($p < .07$). This finding was not replicated for the disobedience to the teacher theme, where the majority of subjects in both groups positively evaluated the existence of the rule.

Question 5 investigated the subject's perception of the transgressor's affective state. The responses that Ss gave were grouped into two categories. The first category included responses stating that the transgressor would not be affected either negatively or positively by the act ("he will not care"), or that the actor will experience some negative affect (dissatisfaction or discontent) if caught. The second category included responses stating that the transgressor will experience negative affect because he engaged in an act which was inappropriate or wrong. Results are presented on Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

None of the comparisons between the two groups of subjects

reached significance. The majority responded that these acts will not invoke negative feelings in the transgressor, unless he is caught in which case he will feel bad for having to withstand the consequences for his actions.

Group differences in the stories with moral themes

The proportions of subjects in the LA and HA groups responding positively to questions in stories with moral themes (destruction of school property, injuring another student) are presented on Table 3. Beginning with Question 1 ("was the act

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Insert Table 3 about here

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all right?"), all subjects responded negatively when the transgression involved property destruction. However, when the transgression involved fighting and injuring another student, the majority of subjects in the HA group responded positively ($P < .05$). Similarly, a significantly larger proportion of students in the HA group positively evaluated the act of fighting with another student in the absence of a school rule (Question 3), as compared to a smaller proportion of students in the LA group.

The majority of subjects positively evaluated the need for the existence of school rules against property destruction and fighting among students (Question 2). At the same time subjects

in the HA group differed significantly ($p < .05$) from subjects in the LA group on Question 4. Thus, HA subjects largely stated that physical fights between students would be all right if the participants were not apprehended by the school authorities. For the story involving destruction of property, the same pattern of responding was observed, although the differences between the two groups did not reach significance.

With respect to Question 6 ("can teachers change the rule?"), subjects' responses were negative for the destruction of property story, and more positive for the injury to another student story. Although the majority of HA subjects responded that teachers can change the rule which prohibits fights among students, the comparison with the LA group did not reach statistical significance.

Another comparison between the LA and HA groups that reached statistical significance ($P < .05$) involved responses to Question 7. A significantly higher proportion of Ss in the HA group responded that the transgression described in the stories would be all right in societies with different rules and value systems.

The responses of subjects to Question 5 (which investigated the subject's perception of the transgressor's affective state), are presented in Tables 4 and 5. The answers to the destruction of property question (Table 4) were grouped into two categories.

Insert Table 4 about here

The first category included responses stating that the transgressor would not experience negative affect unless he is caught. The second category included responses stating that the transgressor would experience feelings of guilt and remorse as a result of his act. The comparisons between the two groups were significant ($p < .05$). The large majority of subjects in the LA group responded that the actor would experience guilt, whereas the majority of subjects in the HA group reasoned that the transgressor would experience unpleasurable feelings only if he is apprehended by the school authorities.

Next, the answers to the story involving a fight with another student were grouped in three categories which are presented on Table 5. While the first two categories are

Insert Table 5 about here

identical with those for the destruction of property story, the third category included responses stating that the winner of the fight would experience positive affect ("he would feel cool, good, proud of himself"). Of the pairwise comparisons between the HA and LA groups only one (categories 2 and 3) reached statistical significance. Thus a significantly higher proportion

of LA subjects responded that the transgressor would experience feelings of guilt and remorse as a result of hurting another student. By contrast, most subjects in the HA group described the transgressor's affective state as positive (a result of being a winner in the fight).

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate how juvenile delinquents understand and discriminate between different kinds of rules, taking into account rule domain. The findings revealed clear differences in the ways the two groups of adolescents evaluated the acts governed by school rules.

Given the existence of the rule, subjects evaluated the transgression negatively in all four stories with the exception of the story portraying a fight between two students. In this story, subjects in the HA group reported that the act was all right despite the rule, and apparently disregarded the fact that the hitting resulted in the injury of another individual.

In the absence of a rule prohibiting the acts described in the four stories, all subjects positively evaluated the social-conventional acts, and negatively evaluated the act of destroying school property. At the same time only the LA subjects were consistent in their evaluations of acts pertaining to the moral

domain, as they also negatively evaluated the act of fighting with another student. In contrast, subjects in the LA group, consistent with their positive evaluations of the act when there is a rule prohibiting it, positively evaluated fighting in the absence of the rule.

From these responses it appears that the extremely disruptive, antisocial children treat the incident of engaging into a fight as having a more conventional undertone than the act of destroying property. This is in sharp contrast to responses of normal children in similar stories involving hitting (Weston & Turiel, 1980), and bullying other children (Davidson et al., 1983). In these two studies the events of hitting and being a bully were judged by children as being elements of the moral domain; the main justification offered was that these acts are wrong because they involve harm to other people.

With respect to rule generalizability, rules pertaining to fighting and destruction of property were judged by the less aggressive adolescents as being universal and unalterable by social consensus. These adolescents felt that such rules are needed to protect individual rights and to promote the students' well being in a school. Both social-conventional acts were treated as alterable and non-universal. This finding is once more consistent with studies of normal children (Turiel, 1978).

By contrast, the antisocial adolescents judged all four

rules as being relativistic and non-generalizable to other societies. Both rules pertaining to social acts as well as the rule prohibiting fighting were viewed as being determined by general agreement among authority figures (teachers), and as being alterable by consensus.

Adopting a rather defiant attitude towards the prohibitions presented in the four stories, the antisocial adolescents reported that it would be acceptable for the actor to engage in the act if he were not apprehended by the school authorities. In contrast this was not observed with the LA adolescents who felt that in all four situations the actor would still be breaking a rule whether he was caught or not. Knowing that one can escape consequences should not be an incentive for engaging in actions that have been judged as being either morally or socially wrong. This finding is in partial agreement with Davidson's et al. (1983) study where moral rule violations (though not social rule violations) were judged as being wrong even when they were not associated with punishment.

In general, it appears that antisocial adolescents adopt a view of prohibitions which is very much game-like. Since they perceive rules as mainly serving the purpose of co-ordinating social interactions and possibly as being imposed by authority figures, they can easily justify the act of breaking them when there is no punishment or other consequences involved. Their

view of rules as being externally imposed may obscure their ability to reason about transgressions as being unfair, damaging to the welfare of others, or harmful to individual rights.

In support of this argument is the finding that antisocial adolescents perceived the transgressor as not being likely to experience any emotional reactions as a result of his actions, unless he is either caught and punished by the school authorities, or he wins the fight that he started. In the first case, the implication is that if the transgressor is caught breaking a school rule, the painful consequences of punishment will evoke negative feelings in him, such that he will be motivated to think twice before he breaks another school rule. In the second case the transgressor will experience positive affect because he is the all-powerful winner.

It is noteworthy that in both cases factors such as harm to the victim or the property owner, do not enter the reasoning process of the antisocial adolescent, who is clearly characterized by an external, self-centered disposition in perceiving and dealing with the world around him. Of equal interest is the fact that the adolescents with less disruptive patterns perceived the transgressor's emotional state quite differently. Although the large majority stated that the actor is not likely to experience negative feelings form conventional transgressions, the affect resulting from moral transgressions

was perceived to be one of guilt and remorse. For the small number of LA subjects who responded that the actor will experience negative affect as a result of engaging in social-conventional transgressions, the affect was of a milder nature, centering around feelings of discomfort and discontent.

In this study, the moral judgments of adolescents with less disruptive behaviors were largely indicative of an understanding of the rationales underlying rules and prohibitions. As such they were consistent with the judgments of normal children reported in earlier studies (Davidson et al., 1983; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Weston & Turiel, 1980). At the same time, the antisocial adolescents differed in many ways from the less disruptive ones, and consequently, from normal children. The findings suggest that these differences appear to be attributable to a view of social and moral prohibitions as externally imposed entities. Explaining such group differences will require a systematic examination of environmental and family background factors which may restrict the opportunities of children to experiment with their environment and develop close attachments to significant others.

To conclude, the findings of this study are in support of the notion that children do not have a unitary system of rules; they make conceptual discriminations between rules by reasoning on the basis of moral or conventional criteria. The findings,

though largely exploratory have several implications for moral education, and suggest that in contrast to normal children, antisocial children may often apply conventional criteria to evaluate certain rules within the moral domain. However additional research, incorporating well-defined behavior characteristics for antisocial behaviors is needed to determine the generality of the findings, and to enhance our understanding of the cognitive aspects involved in juvenile delinquency.

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TABLE 1

Percentage of Ss in the HA and LA groups responding affirmatively to questions in the two stories with social-conventional themes.

	STORY THEME			
	Undressing in Class		Disobedience to the Teacher	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
Question 1 Was the act All right?	27.3	0	27.3	0
Question 2 Should there be a rule?	18.2[a]	66.7[a]	72.7	100.0
Question 3 Act O.K in absence of rule	100.0	77.8	54.5	55.6
Question 4 Act O.K if actor not caught?	100.0[b]	33.3[b]	81.8[c]	22.2[c]
Question 6 Can teachers change rule?	81.8	88.9	18.2	33.3
Question 7 Act all right in different society?	100.0	90.9	100.0	100.0

Percentages with similar superscripts are significantly different from one another (all at $p < .05$, except b which is significant at $p < .7$), as determined by the Irwin-Fisher Exact Test.

TABLE 2

Responses of Ss to Question 5 (How do you think the actor would feel?) for stories with **social-conventional** themes.

	STORY THEME			
	Undressing in Class		Disobedience to the Teacher	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
No Affect unless caught	90.9	100.0	100.0	77.8
Negative affect	9.1	0	0	22.2

TABLE 3

Percentage of Ss in the HA and LA groups responding affirmatively to questions in stories with moral themes.

	STORY THEME			
	Destruction of Property		Fighting with another Student	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
Question 1 Was the act All right?	0	0	54.5[a]	0[a]
Question 2 Should there be a rule?	100.0	100.0	63.6	88.9
Question 3 Act O.K in absence of rule	18.2	0	81.8[b]	11.1[b]
Question 4 Act O.K if actor not caught?	45.7	11.1	90.9[c]	22.2[c]
Question 6 Can teachers change rule?	9.1	0	54.5	22.2
Question 7 Act all right in different society?	81.8[d]	0[d]	100.0[e]	11.1[e]

Percentages with similar superscripts are significantly different from one another (all at $p < .05$), as determined by the Irwin-Fisher Exact Test.

TABLE 4

Percentage of Ss in the HA and LA groups responding to Question 5 in the **destruction of property** story.

	Group	
Response	HA	LA
No affect unless caught	90.9	9.1
Remorse, guilt	22.2	87.8

The comparisons between proportions in this Table are significant at $p < .05$ as determined by the Irwin-Fisher Exact Test.

TABLE 5

Percentage of Ss in the HA and LA groups responding to Question 5 in the story involving a fight with another student.

	Group	
Response	HA	LA
No affect unless caught	36.4	33.3
Remorse, guilt	18.2	66.7
Winner experiences positive affect	45.5	0

APPENDIX 1

STORY THEMES CLASSIFIED BY DOMAIN

1. STORIES WITH SOCIAL-CONVENTIONAL THEMES

UNDRESSING IN CLASS

Alan is going to a high school where the rule is that students cannot come to class without shirts or shoes. On a hot summer day Alan was getting really hot sitting in class, so he quickly started to take his shirt and shoes off.

DISOBEDIENCE TO THE TEACHER

Paul is going to the same high school where the rule is that students have to ask permission from the teacher before they can leave the classroom. Paul was in class one day when he felt like he wanted to go out. So he got out of his desk and walked toward the door.

2. STORIES WITH MORAL THEMES

GETTING INTO A FIGHT AND INJURING ANOTHER STUDENT

In the same high school, the rule was "no hitting, no fighting, no physical violence." George and Peter were out in the school yard talking during a break. The talk turned into an argument and pretty soon the two of them were fighting. George was hitting Peter around until Peter fell unconscious on the ground.

DESTROYING SCHOOL PROPERTY

In the same high school, they have a rule which says that students should not take or destroy anything that does not belong to them. Jeff who goes to this high school was in the art room by himself one day cutting paper with scissors. At some point he felt like cutting the vinyl chairs that were in the room, so he went around and started to slash them.

APPENDIX 2

Questions Following the Presentation of Stories

1. Do you think that what ____ did was all right or not all right? Why?
2. Do you think there should be a rule against ____? Why?
3. What if there was no rule against ____. Do you think it would be all right for _____ to do what he did?
4. Do you think it would be all right for ____ to _____ if he knew he wouldn't get caught? Why?
5. How do you think ____ is going to feel about what he did? Why?
6. Do you think this rule can be changed by teachers? Why?
7. Suppose that in a different society people did not have this rule and thought quite differently than we do. If this is how people thought would what John did be all right or nor all right? Why?